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JOHN TAYLOR & SONS IN SWITZERLAND

R. Von Arx

SYNOPSIS

John Taylor & Sons had wide ranging interests in metalliferous mining both at home and abroad. Their attention was drawn to argentiferous deposits in Switzerland during the 1860s but despite heavy capital investment the venture collapsed a few years later primarily as a result of difficulties in treating the refractory ores and harsh climatic conditions.

In the second half of last century British venture capital was looking for promising mining properties outside of Britain. The resulting investments in Australia, South Africa and in North and South America are fairly well known. What is less known is the fact that British capital and engineering was also in evidence on the Continent of Europe. Some examples are: The Pestarena United Gold Mining Co. Ltd (1865-1880), The Monte Rosa Gold Mining Co. Ltd (1894-1900), The Evancon Gold Mining Co. Ltd. (1902-1910) – all working the southern flanks of the Monte Rosa massif in the North of Italy; the Val Barbina (Italian) Nickel Mining Co. Ltd. (around 1872) and the Emerald Mines Ltd. (1896-1913), the latter exploiting the well-known emerald mines in the Austrian Habach Valley (a 42 carat stone from there apparently is among the British Crown Jewels). No research seems to have been done on this topic and, thus, we ignore who were the people and engineering firms involved in those enterprises a number of which – according to fragments in local literature – were quite profitable.

A considerably less successful venture in Switzerland was headed by the pre-eminent engineering firm of John Taylor & Sons, 6 Queen Street Place, Upper Thames Street, London. Situated in the mountain canton of Grisons, the mines were reputed for their argentiferous copper ore. The firm registered under the name of VAL-SASSAM MINES CO. LTD. with a capital of £60,000 in shares of £10 each, an enormous sum of money for the local mines then active in the region.

Starting in about 1860 British mining engineers roamed through the Grisons and the neighbouring Tyrol looking for ore bodies that had been exploited before. Eventually the two mining regions of Tospino and Orsera attracted their particular attention. In both places work had been done since ancient times. A concession was obtained around 1859 by an Italian mining engineer/adventurer involved in various similar enterprises, who seemed only too pleased to foist it on British prospectors unfamiliar with the heavily faulted lodes of the Swiss Alps. The concession area was huge by British standards; it measured no less than 12 by 20 miles and is criss-crossed by numerous lodes of different nature.

The firm's experts had ample opportunity to check out the prospects. R. Heneage Taylor and R.W. Richard were despatched for this purpose in August of 1864. They examined the various lodes (including one called "Five Englishmen"). Many assays were made by them in the local laboratory of the Italian and the results were generally

very promising. The detailed report handed in with a covering letter of Messrs. John Taylor & Sons on 10th November 1864 finished with the sentence: "With these requisites for the efficient working of these mines, we think that they afford great promise of proving a good and profitable speculation".

The two Taylor delegates were accompanied on their inspection trip by civil engineer Jonathan Dickson Ikin of Great George Street, Westminster, who attested their great conscientiousness in his report. He was struck by the natural facilities such as abundant water-power all through summer, excellent sites for the establishment of washing and crushing works, availability of unlimited cheap timber right next to the mines. and in addition lime, stone and low-cost labour. J. Dickson also drew comparison between the local ore and that of U.K. mines of the day. He found the yields of the former closely approaching those of the richest silver mine known in England, viz. Herodsfoot Mine in Cornwall. His comparative table must have gone a long way to convince any doubting adventurers:

MINES	Lead per ton of ore	Ounces of silver	Value per ton		
	Cwts	per ton of ore	£	s.	d.
Cornwall	13½	33	23	2	3½
Isle of Man	15½	29	24	1	10½
Durham/Northumberland	15	3½	16	11	3
Tospino (Switzerland)	7½	58	23	11	7½
Orsera (Switzerland) copper	1	147	46	17	1

A further assay giving excellent results was done by James Napier Jr. of Rotherhithe on behalf of the Italian concession holder. As an added incentive the village owning the land waived any rent or share in the proceeds hoping to secure a considerable number of jobs for the local populace, which would stem the forced emigration overseas.

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The Val-Sassam Mines Co. was formed at the end of 1864 with the following directors:

- Valentine Bavier, Banker, Coire (Switzerland).
- John Bishoff, Messrs. Streckeisen, Bishoff & Co., Merchants, New Broad Street, London.
- John Orred, Director of the Gonnesa Mining Co. Ltd., Ashwick Hall, near Chippenham.
- E.A. Pontifex, director of the Cape Copper Mining Co. Ltd., Shoe Lane, London.
- F.G. Schoch, Merchant, Zurich (Switzerland).
- John Taylor, 6 Queen Street Place, London.
- Richard Taylor, 6 Queen Street Place, London.

The general management lay in the hands of R. Heneage Taylor whilst Thomas Rickard was in charge of operations in the capacity of Mine Manager. They lived in the village where their house still stands, containing what the locals call an "English kitchen with fire-place and grill".

After preparatory work including a suspension road and sporadic ore production in 1865, mining proper started in 1866 (one promising part of the underground works was called "Taylor Gallery"). Trouble was, however, not long in coming. The Company Secretary W.G. Williams reported to the Directors in February 1868 that although sufficient ore was raised, the projected profit of £2,000 could not be realised in consequence of the impossibility of obtaining more than a comparatively small proportion of its silver content. Richard Taylor had specially travelled to Switzerland in September 1867 to look into this troublesome problem. He had suggested some changes in the dressing operations and at the same time had some ore samples sent to an amalgamation works in Spain. The report from there stated that the water dressing employed was unsuitable and that it should be replaced by the barrel process of amalgamation. Thomas Rickard found from further experiments that no less than 62% of the total silver content remained in the slimes and sands.

The ore stuff then at surface was calculated to contain about 7,500 ounces of silver. A further 11,400 ounces of silver remained in the slimes and sands which had been carefully preserved from the outset.

The working was also dogged by rigours of climate, in one mine the working season was reduced to 3½ months because of heavy snows, while operations for 8 months had been reckoned on. When prospecting favourable looking ore outcrops at higher altitude, it was found that the snow did not leave the place all summer. In the end the yield of the large quantity of ore turned out to be much inferior to calculations ("the ore makes very irregularly"). Williams reported on a sum of £618 outstanding for calls, the list of defaulters having been placed in their solicitors' hands. To meet some of the more pressing liabilities a loan of £1,500 was obtained from John Taylor & Sons' bankers. A call of 10s. per share was proposed for immediate expenses and a further identical call if the shareholders determined to authorise the construction of the amalgamation works.

For the period from 1st October 1866 to 31st December 1867 the total expenses amounted to £6,383. They included £600 for the salaries of Superintendent and Mine Agent (or £480 p.a. for both of them), £214 for clerks' salaries and office expenses, £108 for travelling expenses, £8 for subscription to the local school, as well as £375 for salaries of Manager, Secretary and office rent in London. The books of the Company were regularly examined by Joseph George and John Phillips, Auditors, London.

The net proceeds on ore amounting to only £2,370, a loss of £4,013 resulted. The ore proceeds included an estimated amount of £480 for 20 tons of enriched ore sent all the way to Swansea. At that time a total of £40,000 had, been called.

In the hope of recovering the silver remaining in the slimes and sands and to better treat the ore stuff to be raised in future, an amalgamation works was eventually authorised by the shareholders in spite of the hardly encouraging results. Its chimney is still standing.

JOHN TAYLOR & SONS IN SWITZERLAND

Notwithstanding the very good wages paid, the Company was plagued by labour problems. In 1868 the local work-force was sacked and replaced by Tyrolese miners, Thomas Rickard writing to the village council: “The local workers think they are real miners when they can hold a hammer!” More trouble developed when the administration building was destroyed by a fire that had started in the laboratory. Again extremely unfavourable weather followed in the summer of 1868 reducing the working period to only 3 months.

By now the finances of the Company were in desperate straits as the ore value was consistently far below the assays. In a last-ditch gamble Rickard in 1869 took out a lease for all iron ore deposits of the whole valley at a cost of £500. However, it is doubtful if work to this end actually started at all because the Company filed for bankruptcy a year later. The former Secretary W.G. Williams was appointed Liquidator. John Taylor & Sons felt that a competent person should be on the spot to sell off machinery and materials. This job was handed to one of their agents, Treloar, who was formerly employed at the Val-Sassam mines. There was a plan to send some of the machinery to England for [16] sale in view of the high prices for iron ruling there at that time, but the cost of transport would have been too high. Hope to recover money from the defaulters (mainly Swiss shareholders) was soon abandoned as legal proceedings could not have been taken without great expense and with dubious chances of recuperating money. The total loss eventually incurred amounted to some £50,000. This – as far as we know – was the beginning and the end of John Taylor & Sons’ activities in Switzerland.

The author would welcome any information on British mining companies in Switzerland, Italy and Spain.

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